

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

Somaliland and Secession Politics in Eastern Africa

EDWARD MARONCHA — 13 August, 2018



Somalia has been that isolated relative that no one speaks about. The one that lives in a little hut, far away from the general community, with little interaction with anyone. Nieces and nephews do not visit her, because she is said to be a witch. Everyone fears her, and so she is largely ignored. Nobody wants to go near her homestead.

Since the overthrow of Siad Barre in 1991, Somalia descended into anarchy. No one in the country, it seemed, was strong enough to pull the country into any form of order. In fact, some argue that the collapse of Somalia began during the reign of Siad Barre, not after. Clan wars raged and the country became ungovernable. Except for Somaliland.

Somaliland: An Oasis

Somaliland, which calls itself the Republic of Somaliland, declared itself independent of Mogadishu in 1991, following the collapse of Barre's government. Somaliland established a government that was surprisingly stable, and while the rest of the country seemed to perish, Somaliland attained peace and stability. With Hargeisa as its capital, the region established a working political system and effective administration.

The one thing it lacked, and still lacks, is official recognition from other states. Somalia is a member of the UN and the African Union, and nobody seems willing to encourage the secession. While Somaliland lacks the official recognition of countries, it does not lack trading partners. Her leading export destinations are Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, UAE and Oman, while she receives imports from countries in the region such as Ethiopia and Kenya as well as countries as far as Brazil, China, Japan, India and Italy. As a matter of fact, Somaliland is by all means a sovereign state, only that nobody says so loudly.

Re-emergence of Mogadishu

The lack of an effective government in Mogadishu helped Somaliland establish itself as an independent state. There was no one to challenge its independence, the way the Spanish government in Madrid has been suppressing Catalonia's claims of independence. Thus, while the rest of Somalia was exploding, Somaliland was going about its business peacefully and efficiently.

But the Mogadishu government has been reestablished. After many meetings, a Federal Government has slowly been taking shape in Mogadishu. With the help of the African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the Federal Somali government has been slowly stamping its authority in the country, driving away the terrorists and establishing government control.

It is far from getting full control of the country, but at least there is a semblance of a government in the country. The biggest question that arises from the re-emergence of Mogadishu is this: what will become of Somaliland?

Officially, the region is semi-autonomous and while it conducts its own affairs independently, it (supposedly) reports to Mogadishu. In reality, Somaliland is an independent State. Can the Somaliland leaders, who have been fully autonomous for over twenty-five years, surrender their autonomy to a fragile government in Mogadishu?

And if they don't, which is very likely, will Eastern Africa witness prolonged hostilities such as those witnessed between Ethiopia and Eritrea?

Ethiopia and Eritrea: Peace at last?

This is an interesting time to pose this question, because Ethiopia and Eritrea have just ended their decades-long conflict. The two nations have seen their leaders sign peace agreements and normalize relations between them.

Eritrea was colonized by the Italians (and later the British on a Trust Mandate), and when they left, Ethiopia took over the region. Eritrea fought for its independence for over thirty years, before overcoming Ethiopia in 1991. And

internationally supervised referendum ended with the independence and official recognition of the State of Eritrea.

Eritrea and Ethiopia enjoyed a short duration of cordial relations before the Eritrean-Ethiopia broke out in 1998. The Algiers Agreement of 2000 was supposed to have settled the dispute between the two countries, but tensions have continued until this year (2018).

Would a similar situation arise between the Federal Republic of Somalia and the Republic of Somaliland if Somaliland is officially recognized as a sovereign state?

In the alternative, would the Sudan situation play out where the divorce is smooth but the young country is rocked by internal conflict?

South Sudan: Independence too soon?

Sudan was rocked by a bloody civil war for decades. The south protested the dominance of the north, and took to the bushes to fight for their independence. The Khartoum government held on tight, and the conflict moved from months to years to decades.

Peace agreements were negotiated, and finally, in 2005, a comprehensive settlement was reached, ending the conflict. One of the agreed issues was that a referendum would be held to determine the question of South Sudan's independence.

The region voted for independence, and so in 2011 South Sudan became Africa's youngest nation. The independence of the region stoked the fires of hope in many. The South Sudanese were elated and investors rushed to the region.

Juba became the centre of attention, a new hub in East Africa.

But all this was short lived. A conflict between Salva Kiir and his deputy Riek Machar led to another civil war, this time an all South affair. The country quickly descended from hope to despair, and Juba became the symbol of everything that could go wrong. The two leaders have recently signed a peace agreement, and we can only hope that it will hold.

The primary difference between South Sudan and Somaliland is that while South Sudan was a fragile militia-driven region fighting a stable, if dictatorial, mother government in Khartoum, Somaliland is the opposite: a stable government facing a fragile mother government in Mogadishu.

Conclusion

Mogadishu and Hargeisa have largely ignored each other. Mogadishu sees Somaliland as a semi-autonomous region in its territory. Hargeisa seems not to be bothered by that, largely because Mogadishu has no control over it.

But a time will come, as Mogadishu increases in strength, when it will want to stamp its authority over the region. Will there be an open (and bloody) conflict that will throw the Horn of Africa into further turmoil?

There will always be questions around the Somaliland issue. Would it have been wiser to recognize Somaliland and later reconstruct the rest of Somalia? Would the recognition of Somaliland have elicited independence claims from other regions of Somalia such as Jubaland and Puntland?

As it stands today, it seems unlikely that Somaliland will get official recognition, with Mogadishu regaining its strength. But Mogadishu is not strong enough to fight anyone right now, so status quo will probably remain for a long time.

Unless of course, a foreign power intervenes and tries to help the Federal Republic of Somalia get a grip of Somaliland.

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